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The Turnbull Report: An Analysis

HUGH CRAIG

The recent financial crisis in the Church of England has forced a serious rethink of the Church's finances and structures. The Bishop of Durham, the Rt Rev Michael Turnbull, chaired a committee which has submitted a report on these matters to the General Synod for debate in February 1996.

Hugh Craig, a longtime member of the Synod, has written the following appraisal of the report under the auspices of Church Society. We are publishing it here, so that it may reach a wider audience as quickly as possible.

1 Background

The setting of the Turnbull Commission arose from two causes. First there was unease at the very high losses (partly paper, partly real) that were incurred by the Church Commissioners a few years ago. They had made three errors. Their Assets Committee had borrowed heavily in order to finance speculative developments, and they had effectively used some of their capital resources to provide income to deal with the problems that ensued. The third error was unconnected, but also arose from poor financial control, in that they had accepted liabilities in relation to clergy pensions greatly in excess of their ability to fund them.

The second reason for setting up the Commission was the realisation that decision taking in our central structures was a somewhat diffuse business. Some decisions were taken by the House of Bishops, some by Lambeth, some by the Synod, some by the Commissioners and so on, with only limited procedures for consultation. At best this was inefficient: at worst, it could result in real problems being left untackled, or tackled badly.

So a Commission of thirteen persons, hand-picked by the Archbishops, and approved by the Synod Standing Committee, was set up in 1994, and they reported on 20 September 1995. Their terms of reference were: *To review the machinery for central policy and resource direction in the Church of England, and to make recommendations for improving its effectiveness in supporting the ministry and mission of the Church to the*

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nation as a whole.

The new General Synod had a preliminary 'take note' debate on the Report in November 1995, with a more substantive debate, and possibly the general approval stage of legislation planned for February 1996. This time-table suggests an attempt to rush the proposals through before the new Synod has found its feet, and before the Church at large has woken up to what is happening.

2 The Contents and Style of the Report

The Report commences with two chapters which can be loosely described as theological, setting out the approach the Commission aspired to take, and a third chapter which serves as a transition to its main proposals. These are contained in the remaining eight chapters, the first of them giving the main proposal, and the seven describing the impact of this on the General Synod, the House of Bishops, the Commissioners, the Pensions Board, the dioceses, and on finance. A final chapter summarises the proposals, and there are three appendices.

There is much in the theological section with which we might well agree:

- that God has given to his Church adequate gifts, if only we would use them aright
- that we wish to avoid 'a large centralised bureaucracy': that those who discharge responsibilities must be properly accountable
- that government in the Church cannot be equated either with democracy or with secular management
- that Jesus' rebuke to the disciples for the 'jealous dispute' (Luke 22: 24) is relevant to us today
- that those with authority and power must be open to criticism and to proper consultation with others
- that the Church's response to God's graciousness involves worship, service and witness
- that the parochial system retains much of value, and the varied gifts of the laity are to be harnessed
- that parishes must have freedom to make their own plans, be

responsible for their own resources, but also be prepared to give and receive.

The Report then turns briefly to resources: of people, of buildings, and of money; and to the Church's partnerships: ecumenical, state, with voluntary bodies and with the rest of the Anglican Communion.

The third chapter is entitled 'Why we must work as one body' and it appraises in a somewhat subjective manner the problems which the Report will proceed to address, extolling the coherence achieved in dioceses through the workings of the model of the Bishop-in-Synod. Not all laity and not all parties would agree! As one who has spent almost a lifetime observing the centre, and the life of seven dioceses, I have to express a little scepticism about this analysis. The chapter is also astonishingly naive.

For instance, it notes that '*the present generation of churchgoers is not endowing the Church as past generations did*', and goes on in the next paragraph (3:20) to say its '*recommendations could provide an effective instrument for tackling the inherent inequalities in the local endowments of the Church*'. Do they not even yet understand that the confiscation and redistribution of endowments by the centre is a major cause of the reluctance to endow, since it is a means whereby an arrogant centre has frustrated the donors' original intentions? But the chapter also has a useful discourse on the need for subsidiarity – for things to be done at the right level, indeed the lowest level that is practicable – spoilt only by the impression that that Commission could see no lower than the diocese. For much of the real lay dissatisfaction is with over-fat diocesan structures, rather than with the centre. For many parishes and lay folk the diocese has become 'them' rather than 'us'.

The chapter complains that the Archbishops have no adequate executive machinery. It rightly observes that the Church's strategy should be mission-led rather than resource-led. It further complains about the lack of strategic overview in relation to ordination selection, numbers and quality, which makes one wonder what the House of Bishops, with their current stranglehold on such matters, has been doing! Clearly, they wish the stranglehold tightened, perhaps regretting that the Synod has not always agreed with shutting down successful colleges. They criticise, with some cause, the lack of coherence between the work of existing Boards and Councils, and so on.

All of this leads into the Commission's proposals, though the connection is at times a little hard to follow. For they present their recommendations as a kind of *fait accompli*, with very little consideration either of the

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possible alternative solutions that might have been offered, or of a comparison of the effect of their proposals as compared with the theological principles that they had earlier enunciated, indeed, without recognition that in some respects they have gone against their own theology. Let us now look at these recommendations.

2a The Proposed National Council

The centrepiece of the recommendations is the setting up of a National Council, *'to enhance the operation of episcopal leadership and synodical governance and to restore confidence in national institutions ... to provide a forum in which those who lead the institutions of the Church could act as an executive serving the Church ... [to provide] the consistent, coherent driving force the Church needs if it to work as one body'*.

The staffs of the Central Board of Finance, the General Synod, the Archbishops, the Church Commissioners and the Pensions Board will be merged to form a single staff service under the Council.

The Council would comprise:

- the Archbishops of Canterbury and York
- four part-time executive chairmen responsible for human resources, mission resources, heritage and legal services, and finance
- the two Prolocutors (Chairman & Vice Chairman of the House of Clergy)
- the Chairman and Vice Chairman of the House of Laity
- two members of the House of Bishops, elected by them
- the Chairman of a new Synod Business Committee, elected by the Synod
- the Secretary-General of the Council
- and finally, the Archbishops would have power to nominate three others.

The four part-time executive chairmen would be nominated by the Archbishops and their appointment approved by the General Synod, though on the first occasion the appointments would be discussed with a Committee consisting of the Prolocutors, the Chairman and Vice Chairman of the House of Laity, the First Church Estates Commissioner, the Chairman of the Appointments Sub-Committee, the retiring Chairman of the Central Board of Finance, the Archbishop's Appointments Secretary and the Secretary General.

The Council is therefore to comprise 17 people. Assuming, as the Report thinks likely, that three of the four executive chairmen would be bishops, and the fourth a layman, the Council would consist of seven Bishops, two elected clergy, two elected laity, one un-elected

layman, the Secretary General, and four others who might be episcopal, clerical or lay. Of the seventeen, twelve would be Archbishops, Bishops, or people nominated by the Archbishops.

This Council is to be responsible for central policy, for the initiation of all future legislation, for the setting up and supervision of all central Boards or Councils, and for the supervision of the combined, unified staff.

2b The General Synod

The Commission proposes two major changes to the General Synod, though they do not address the general question of its composition, leaving this to the Bridge Commission.

One change relates to its Standing Committee, and the other to General Synod membership.

At present the Standing Committee consists of the Archbishops, two elected Bishops, the two Prolocutors, the Chairman and Vice Chairman of the House of Laity, eight clergy and eight laity elected by their respective Houses. It operates with three main sub-committees. A Business Sub-Committee deals with the detailed agenda for each group of sessions. An Appointments Sub-Committee makes all appointments to Committees or Boards etc... that have to be made in the name of the Standing Committee. A Policy Sub-Committee deals with general policy questions, and has sometimes been described by the ignorant as the 'cabinet' of the Church.

I say 'the ignorant', not to insult them, but because such could hardly have been aware of what really happens. I think it was the wish of the Infrastructure Review, and of some of us on the Synod, that the Policy Sub-Committee should deal with at least some major policy questions. But that wish was dashed when the Archbishop of Canterbury intimated at its first meeting of the 1990-1995 quinquennium that he would not always be attending, and would hand over the chairmanship to the Archbishop of York. From that alone one could discern that the Archbishops had no real intention of the Policy Sub-Committee directing policy and, although at that first meeting some attempt was made, subsequent agendas, and the time devoted to meetings, ensured that little progress was made. It is nonsense for the Commission to state (p 67) that the Committee's scope for strategic thinking was 'limited by the very fragmentation of the central structures'. It was limited because neither the bishops nor the staff wished it to happen. It was not (it rarely is) the structures – however imperfect – that were lacking, but the will, and the time, and perhaps the competence.

So, on a pretext, the Commission takes from the Standing

Committee all responsibility for policy, and replaces it with a Business Committee with powers little different from the present Business Sub-Committee simply to arrange the items on the agenda for each group of sessions. That body is to be presided over by an elected chairman (with the Archbishops having ex-officio membership), but will not even have the power to introduce legislation into its own synod. The proposed new Appointments Committee, in addition to an elected chairman and five elected synod members, is to have two members appointed by the National Council and the Secretary-General as its membership. The powers of the Synod, in spite of protestations otherwise, are being savagely cut in an attempt to reduce it to the rubber-stamp mould of the worst diocesan synods.

The other change is that all the members of the National Council, including the Secretary-General and all those nominated by the Archbishops become ex-officio members of the Synod with voting rights and the right to speak in debate. Guess who will be given priority to speak by the Chairman!

2c The Church Commissioners

The existing Church Commissioners are a somewhat strange body. The Commissioners consist of 95 persons, the 43 Diocesan Bishops, the 3 Church Estate Commissioners, 5 Deans or Provosts, 4 nominated by the Crown, and 4 by the Archbishop of Canterbury, 10 officers of state, 10 clergy and 10 laity elected by their Synod houses, and representatives of the cities of London and York and of the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge. It will be noted that the Bishops and their nominees constitute over half the Commissioners.

This oversized body meets really only once a year to transact formal business and have a good lunch. The real supervision, such as it is, is done by the Board of Governors consisting of the two Archbishops, four other Bishops, the three Church Estates Commissioners, and eight clergy and eight laity chosen from among the other Commissioners. This is the body which ought to have provided supervision over the Assets Committee when it made its losses, but did not. The episcopal chairman told me he had asked for information, but was refused it, adding that he should then have resigned. Better he should not have taken no for an answer, but then the episcopate has never been very good at controlling a bureaucracy. Its background rarely gives it relevant experience.

The Commissioners also have a General Purposes Committee, a Pastoral Committee and a Houses Committee (recently combined), a Redundant Churches Committee, and a new Bishoprics Committee. Recently also an Audit Committee has been set up to have some overview

of the Assets Committee.

The problem area was the Assets Committee. Quite astonishingly the Commission leave this alone, apparently content that the Audit Committee is change enough. But the rest of the structure they sweep away, transferring the functions to the oversight of the National Council. Included in this transfer is the decision as to the application of the Commissioners' income, not the area where the problems arose, and one where hitherto there have been statutory limitations (though not strict enough) on how the money should be spent, as it was for the cure of souls, ie for maintaining the parochial ministry. It is an open secret that some senior churchmen would like to divert the funds to their own pet worthy causes, which singularly fail to attract popular support.

The Commissioners would be reduced in number from 95 to 15 – the first and second Church Estates Commissioners and three others appointed by the Crown, the two Archbishops, two elected Bishops, a Dean or Provost, two other elected clergy and three elected laity.

One has sympathy with the reduction in the number of Commissioners, though it may have gone too far. But the Commissioners did valuable work through its Houses and Pastoral and Redundant Churches Committees including quasi-judicial functions in settling disputes between patron, parish, parishioners and diocese. This they endeavoured to do impartially, though for structural reasons I personally suspect the system gave a slight edge to the diocese. But now the Commission wants these functions transferred to the umbrella of the National Council. And hidden away in another chapter (p 54) there is a telling comment: *'Nor should decisions about pastoral casework, for example, be divorced from a framework of policy on how the Church is going to deliver its ministry which the whole Church has discussed and owned.'*

That is, quasi-judicial functions will be exercised in the light of a national policy, proposed by a nominated National Council and forced through a castrated Synod.

Parishes take note: impartial justice for you is to give way to deliberate weighting against you!

2d Other Bodies

Time will not permit detailed description of the other bodies affected. Chapter 7 describes the relationship between the House of Bishops and the National Council.

Chapter 9 proposes a new framework for the Pensions Board

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reconstituted along the lines recommended in the Goode Report with perhaps fifteen trustees, including three members of the Council, and six other members nominated by the Council, presided over by either a senior member of the Council, or someone nominated by them. The Pensions Board staff is merged with the other staffs. Chapter 10 discusses the relationship between the Council and the dioceses, proposing that the Finance Committee, replacing the Central Board of Finance, should have diocesan representation via six nominated Diocesan Board of Finance chairmen (one from each of a proposed six regional groupings of dioceses), rather than via elected Synod representatives. It bolsters its weak argument by claiming that the evidence it has received 'has disclosed a concern that considerations of churchmanship feature too prominently in General Synod and that members may not sufficiently reflect the concerns of their particular diocese'. I can say only that I have taken part in nine elections of diocesan representatives to the Central Board of Finance in six dioceses, and churchmanship played no part whatsoever in any of them.

Some modest devolvement of powers to the diocese is proposed, but the overwhelming shift is of power to the centre. Chapter 11 deals with some financial matters, claiming that the proposals will in the long term, but not the short term, bring about some economies, and incidentally showing that the principal thing being devolved to the dioceses is costs – to the tune of £3,100,000! For a serious report the absence of any hard facts, or serious detailed costings, is particularly disturbing. Either the costing has not been done, or it has been done and ordinary churchfolk are not being told what it is, or it has been done, and the Commission is afraid that the figures will not bear public scrutiny. Whichever is the true explanation, it scarcely reflects credit on the Commission.

3 Appraisal of the Report

I turn now from outlining the proposals to consideration of their weaknesses, indeed, not only weaknesses, but the grave threat to our Church that some aspects of them pose.

3a Accountability

All, I think, are agreed that we need greater accountability in the central structures of our Church. The authors of the Report would agree. But to whom is the centre to be accountable? In practice, one is accountable really only to those who 'hire and fire'. This Report makes the majority of the National Council therefore accountable only to the Archbishops, and the centralised staff accountable only to the Council Secretary General. This will not do. The Council must be accountable to the wider church, which in practice probably means accountable to the Synod.

3b Representation

It took fifty years from the setting up of the old Church Assembly to the inauguration of the first General Synod where, for the first time, representative laity and clergy joined together with the bishops in the government of the Church. This Report, perhaps inadvertently, takes the laity back to a pre-1919 position. With appalling arrogance, doubtless unconscious, the Report time and again overlooks the contribution that representative, elected laity can make. The present role of the Synod is subordinated to a National Council which can form policy largely without hearing the views of 99% of the Church. Departments can be formed to deal with various aspects of Church life, and their formation is discussed without reference to what part, if any, the representatives of the 99% are to take. Mind you, that 99% is required to give their money, and the National Council will tell them how the money is to be spent. This is not just saying to the laity, 'turn up, pay up and shut up', it is perilously close to the eye saying to the hand 'I have no need of you'. In all my forty-five years on Church Assembly and General Synod I cannot remember any report that came near to this one in the way it patronises (and therefore insults) the laity of the Church of England.

I do not take issue with the Commission on the desirability of having a central policy body, but it must be a body that is representative and in touch, and that effectively means one predominantly elected by Synod.

3d Centralisation

For too long the Church has followed the worst of contemporary secular fashions, and the craving of this report for centralisation, with its unified staff and national council based on management concepts, is another example. We need a slimmed down centre, that does less, but does it well. We need slimming, especially at diocesan level, but we need that slimming in order to concentrate our resources at parish level, where most of the real work of the Church is done. How can we possibly believe that we need one staff member in Church House, Westminster for every twenty clergy, with several more employed at diocesan level? Our crying need is to decentralise – a concept to which the Report gives lip service, but their recommendations do not.

3e Who is at the tiller?

There is something pathetic about the claim of the Report that the proposed reorganisation would enable the House of Bishops to give a proper lead. Nothing in the existing structures has prevented them from doing just that. The structures might have impeded the church following that lead, though that is doubtful, but they could not possibly have prevented the lead being given. What impedes the lead being given is partly the very heavy burden we place on our bishops, and partly the

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unrepresentative composition of that House due to the discredited Crown Appointments Commission's unhelpful procedures. The Report adds to the former problem, and does nothing about the latter.

But the Report reads, at many points, as if what it desires is to add to the powers of the episcopate at the expense of all other churchpeople. Episcopal appointees take precedence over elected representatives time and again. At a time when popular esteem for the episcopate is not particularly high, we are to become an authoritarian church – perhaps some would even think a monochrome one. After decades when laity in their droves have been voting with their feet, we are to tell them that their contribution – money apart – is not wanted, and their views do not matter. It certainly reads like a sordid power-grabbing exercise by frightened bishops. But I wonder – I wonder very much – if this impression is either fair or accurate.

Who actually will run the Church of England if this Report is accepted? Not I think the House of Bishops, for all their talk of Bishops-in-Synod. An over-busy House of forty-three Bishops is no match for a streamlined unified staff service of well-nigh 500. Is the story going round that this unified staff was demanded by senior staff true? I doubt it, but I do not know. What I do know from a lifetime in industry, and a few hilarious hours watching Yes Minister, and some less hilarious hours watching Church House staff both when badly-run and well-run, is that the real power centre may well be there. Is that what the Commission, and more important, is that what the Church wants? I think not.

4 The Theology of the Report and its Conclusions

I started by commending some of the theology with which the Report starts. Has the Commission followed it through?

- it claimed God had given us adequate gifts, if we use them aright, but then neglects the gifts given in such abundance to the laity
- it wanted to avoid 'a large centralised bureaucracy', and then creates one
- it states that Church Government cannot be equated with secular management, then effectively does so
- it reminds us of our Lord's rebuke in Luke 22: 24, and then ignores our Lord's 'You are not to be like that'
- it claims the varied gifts of the laity are to be harnessed, but has no vision of doing so
- it says that parishes are to be free to make their own plans, but wants to restrict them within an undefined national policy.

Would that the Commission had listened to themselves!

5 What is to be Done?

Our hope and prayer must be that the new Synod will not accept this Report without at least major modification. Such modification must at the very least contain the following elements:-

- i Any National Council must be predominantly elected by the Synod, be a Council of that Synod, and be responsible to it.
- ii Checks must be introduced to guard against undue power passing to the large centralised staff who must be accountable to an elected body.
- iii The retention and strengthening of the independence of the quasi-judicial functions of the Commissioners, whether they are exercised by the Commissioners or some other body.
- iv Proper detailed costings of the proposals must be produced and be open to public scrutiny, including details of the nature of the four new departments, their control, and what elected element is envisaged.
- v A longer period must be allowed for consultation and reflection before legislation is initiated.

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